

## [Fish, Hominy and Cotton]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: FISH, HOMINY AND COTTON

Or JULY GEDDES, NEGRO OF ETWIAN

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Name of Person Interview George Brown (Negro)

Fictitious Name July Geddes

Street Address

Place Edisto Island, South Carolina

Occupation Farmer and Day Laborer.

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Chalmers S. Murray

Edisto Island, S. C. LIFE HISTORY

FISH, HOMINY AND COTTON

Or

JULY GEDDES, NEGRO OF ETIWAN

July Geddes, Negro, was born in a house made of poles, through which the cold blue wind of February whistled lustily.

He first remembers the pole shack set down on the black dirt of his father's farm on Etiwan Island among the tall pine trees that seemed to stick holes in the sky. Later there were memories of a big stream of water running between banks of pluff mud, and oyster shells that cut his bare feet when he helped his elder brother push the bateau off. The water was filled with porgy, croker, trout, whiting, catfish, pincushion fish, shark mullet, crabs and shrimp. July thought that the salt creek was the most wonderful thing he had ever seen. He liked the home place among the pines, but he liked the creek far better.

He attended the Seaside Colored School, a bare half mile from his house, and there under the tutorship of a Negress who afterwards became postmistress of Etiwan, he learned how to write his name, and put down figures on a slate and add the figures up. In concert with other little black boys, he spelled out the words in the first reader. He would recite in a nervous singsong manner, fearful of the licking he would receive if he missed too many words. Then he would go out and play ball with 2 the crowd.

Some of the boys knew how to knock sticks together, making a pleasing rhythmic sound that almost compelled you to dance. You had better not let the teacher catch you dancing, however. Dancing was one of the deadly sins, against the mind of the church. Now, shouting, that was different. It was all right to do those religious dances where you patted your hands and shuffled around the room, but once you crossed your feet it was carnal dancing, an abomination before the Lord.

July went to school for four years. Then he quit to help his father on the farm. The old man was getting stiff in his joints and thought that too much book learning was foolishness. A

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boy of eleven was old enough to handle a shovel and guide a mule down the furrows, for a few hours at least. He was also old enough to go into the woods and cut down small trees and load the high wheel cart with compost to scatter on the cotton field. July was a tough little fellow and didn't mind hard work so much. He ran away and played when the chance offered and took his beating with a resigned air. Life wasn't half bad when you could steal off once in awhile and "go crik".

Those days in the creek when the sun shone hot and the sea breezes dried the perspiration on your face; with line overboard and nothing to do but to wait until a fish nibbled; a watermelon under the bow seat and maybe some sweet bread for lunch; the jerk on the line that transmitted vibrations to your fingers, and then the fight to land the fish; the line cutting the water like a razor blade, the fish floundering around in the bottom of the boat while you are trying to take the hook out of its mouth; later when it was so hot that you couldn't stand it a minute longer, jumping overboard stark naked, dark copper flesh gleaming in the sun, your form swallowed by the blue-green water; trudging home with the fish strung on a blade of marsh grass, walking two miles through the burning sand, the trees easting no shadows because it was noon, then sitting on the door steps eating fried bass and rice for dinner - these early creek days are what July likes best to remember.

At seventeen July got tired working for his father. William Geddes was a stern parent and a very quarrelsome one. he and his sons always seemed to be rowing. They could never do enough to satisfy the old man no matter how hard they tried. July threw a few pieces of clothing into a battered suitcase and took the steamer for Charleston. He stayed with his aunt for a day or so doing nothing but drinking in the exciting life of the city, walking the cobblestone streets and flirting with the girls of Cow Alley. Then he landed a job with a cotton factor.

He was assigned to the task known as "cotton packing". Now, properly speaking a factor has nothing to do with packing cotton - this is accomplished by the gin presses - but it

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seems that in those days there was a lot of loose cotton hanging around the offices of the factors and it must be collected and packed in bags 4 before it was sent to the press. July explains the nature of his job in this way:

“You know that when uh planter send he cotton to the factor for sell, the factor always take pound or two out every bag for sample. He take uh pound from me, he take uh pound from you, he take uh pound from your pa, and the time the season over he got plenty of pound. Then he have all of the pound gather up and gin and send um 'cross the water to England for sell. Planter don't see none of that money - no sir[.?] Factor been keen man. Charge you for sell the cotton, charge interest on the borrow you make, buy grocery wholesale and sell um to you retail. I work for factor and make pretty well for young man - seventy-five cent for every day I pack cotton.”

As July puts it those were the days “when sea island cotton been in circulation.” Average grades were bringing forty cents a pound; superfine as high as one dollar. Even the poor Negro farmers were making money - almost enough to pay off the factor at the end of the year. The cotton farmers, white or black who did not get advances from the factors were exceptions. July's father was no exception. He would borrow a little cash in January, but the larger part of the loan would consist of three or four sacks of grits, a sack of rice, some sugar, a small quantity of lard. July would come home every once in a while to see how the old folks were faring, and generally brought a 5 couple of dollars with him to “throw on Pa”, because Old William was getting feeble and couldn't raise enough cotton to satisfy the needs of his large family.

July quit his job in Charleston after two years and went to Jacksonville to work in a lumber mill. Here he was getting a dollar a day and since food and clothing were cheap back in 1900, he managed to save a little money. It wasn't an easy matter to save money around a lumber mill in Florida, however. There was gambling in the shanties every night, light brown woman dressed in scarlet garments circulated among the men, demanding treats, telling the black bucks that there were pleasures to be had if they would visit the houses

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across the railroad tracks after dark. Raw moonshine was being peddled and the stores in town offered for sale purple peg-top trousers, red silk handkerchiefs and big gold filled watches. July pleased around a bit but he stuck to his resolutions and saved enough to come home and marry Mary Bright - comely daughter of old Jonas Bright.

The black babies started to come soon after William and Mary were married and had settled themselves on the old farm among the pines. First to arrive was Sadie; then in rapid succession, George Lee, William, Viola, Ernestine, Henrietta, Alberta, and lastly Josiah, known better by the name of Bluesteel. They came from sturdy Afro-American stock on both sides and in spite of a diet composed largely of fat pork, hominy grits, sweet potatoes, and rice, with an occasional fish and crab thrown in, all of them 6 managed to survive.

As soon as the black babies were weaned they would sit flat on the draughty floor and eat yellow yams sucking contentedly on the tubas for hours at a time. Sometimes there was milk in the house for when the Geddes were in funds they kept a cow, but often there was nothing for the children to drink but water sweetened with molasses or weak tea. Condensed milk was a luxury, reserved for the grown folks, or the sick. The sweet sticky stuff was ranked with candy and horse cakes. Vegetables were rarely seen on the table and fruit was unknown except at Christmas.

July was ambitious to get ahead. He had a better start than many of the island Negroes for his father and his grand aunt had left him eighteen acres of land unencumbered, and a house of sorts. Thirteen acres of the tract was cleared ground[?] the remainder was in woods. The soil would grow cotton without much effort, and when sufficiently pushed with fertilizers was capable of producing good stands of corn, white potatoes, cabbage and small truck. July bought a horse and went to farming in earnest.

His wife, when she was not giving suck to an infant, or washing clothes or cooking or scrubbing floors - she scrubbed every floor twice a week - worked by his side with a hoe,

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and when cotton picking time came all of the children except the 7 babies in arms, were called out to the fields. They never seemed to mind it much. Picking cotton generally was a lark. They would start in to work when the dew was heavy on the grass, and kept going until near eleven. Later in the afternoon when the sun had lost going of its power, the tribe would return to the field. The evening meal was served at dusk dark after the cotton had been weighed and stored in the garret.

July worked his children by spurts, sometimes driving them until their tongues hung out, but often he let them follow their own devices. The boys went and came an they chose. They played hookey from school. The older ones spent nights out and hung around with a gang of loafers who walked the road every Saturday in search of whiskey and women. The girls he petted and spoiled. Above all July wanted his children to get an education. Unlike his father he never made his boys leave school to help on the farm. "Education is valuable for chillun and all human being to have. Education is the capital of the world," he says.

For awhile things went well with July. He planted every available acre in sea island cotton, and worked it with loving care. Little attention was paid to corn or vegetables. Long staple cotton represented real money. You could always buy corn and oats for the horse and the cow could eat grass and wild herbs. Chickens could be raised on scraps and what they picked up, and hogs on slops. He thought that it would always be this way - borrowing 8 from the factor in January, planting cotton in April, harvesting the crop in the fall, paying the factor in December and in January starting all over again.

"During that time I make as much as four - five hundred dollars uh year," he recalls. "That ain't so much but I manage to scrape 'long and feed my wife and chillun after uh fashion. Sometimes I pick up uh day labor job with old Mr. Murray and maybe I find uh few job assist carpenter. I uh kind of jack leg carpenter myself, you know. In them year you ain't got for use much fertilizer. Now you have to lace um in the ground if you 'speck to make crop."

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One by one the boys drifted off - all but Bluesteel. They were tired of the little farm which could never at the best provide a living for more than two or three people. Occasionally jobs could be had on Etiwan plantations that paid fifty cents a day if you worked from sunrise to sunset, but the Geddes boys did not want those kinds of jobs. Their minds were in the city. One of them was caught stealing from a local shopkeeper and July spirited him away at night. When all but Bluesteel [wanted?] to leave, George offered no objections. He was afraid that more trouble was in store for his sons if they continued to walk the roads of Etiwan with hungry eyes.

In 1918 the boll-weevil came and sea island cotton died. July went on planting but his heart was not in it. He knew next to nothing about upland cotton or diversified farming. There was talk in the air about planting larger food crops and growing more vegetables. July listened but was slow in taking action. He didn't have much faith in corn, and vegetables to him were "buckra food." In 1924 he became disgusted with conditions and left for New York City.

July had never earned as much money in his life. It was almost unbelievable. He had landed a job as a stevedore down at the Marine docks and for every hour he worked he drew ninety-six cents. He lived close and began sending money home. He knew little of New York but Harlem and the docks on East River. Once he thought that he would explore Broadway and he started out bravely at the Battery and walked as far as Tenth Street. But the [surging?] crowds and the blare of automobile horns and the policemen frightened him and he dodged into a side street. He never walked on Broadway again.

After nine months he returned to Etiwan. He liked New York well enough but he said that he was homesick for [his?] family and the farm, and the creek filled with good free food. He was only forty-six then but he felt that he was too old to uproot himself from Etiwan and move to Manhattan with Mary and the children. "My farm been need my 'tention," he explains, "it been all I got and I sure God say I fool if I let um grow up in grass and bush."

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He has never left Etiwan since except for brief visits to 10 his sister in Charleston. "My traveling day done over," he says. "I too old for flutter 'round now. I rather stay gradually and nicely at home."

July is now sixty-one, but still sturdy and able to do a full day's work behind the plow on in the ditch. He walks with a slight limp - the result of an injury sustained at the lumber mill in Jacksonville - but this does not handicap him. He thinks nothing of walking five miles to church or an equal distance to visit a sick neighbor. "It uh good thing for uh man to stir he limb," he will tell you. "God going to take way your leg if you don't use um."

He continues to plant cotton. Now it is the short staple variety that he once so thoroughly despised. He has increased his corn and peas acreage, and he even cultivates a vegetable garden for he says that it would be a living shame to throw away the seed that the government gives him. July keeps a few hogs and one cow, and with the proceeds of the WPA wages that he drew for several years, he has almost finished paying for a mule.

He manages to keep the mule in good condition, but the cow has to find her own food most of the time. As a consequence he only gets two quarts of milk from her a day at the very best. The Negroes of Etiwan do not believe in petting their cows. It would be considered the height of foolishness to feed them regularly, or to shelter them from the weather or to milk them 11 more than once in twenty-four hours.

During the coming year, July expects to plant five acres of cotton, eight of corn and two acres in Irish potatoes and small truck. There will also be peas, planted in the corn alleys, a patch of sweet potatoes, and a few rows of tomatoes, lima beans, okra and squash.

He says that he may get enough out of the cotton to pay his taxes, and to buy a dress for Mary, shoes for the children and a pair of trousers for himself. The food will have to come from out of the ground or from the creek - that is the staple articles. he will buy sugar, coffee, salt and like items with the money he earns on odd jobs. If he is lucky he

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can “catch a few days work” on the truck farms of Etiwan, but this will only mean a matter of some twelve dollars.

“When I was married first of start in 1904,” July says, “I been making much as four hundred dollar uh year as I done tell you. Now I scarcely make one hundred and fifty and grocery, and clothes high on the shelf. It look like I oughter been able for save during the thirty-eight year I been marry, but family compeleration keep me down.”

July figures that if he could earn six hundred dollars a year he might make ends meet. With this sum he could pay taxes, insurance, church dues, and the most pressing doctor bills, buy proper food and the necessary clothing, and keep the house in some sort of repair. He says that he would feel 12 more comfortable, however, if he was assured of a thousand dollar income “because you never can tell when God going to throw affliction on the house.”

July would like to own an automobile so that he and Mary could “take uh ride out once in uh while and go to church in bad weather.” But he knows that a car is beyond his reach and he makes himself content with his mule and cart. “Some people ain't even got cart. I thank God for what I got,” July says.

He has been going downhill financially since he returned from New York and the end is not yet in sight. Trying to stretch one hundred and fifty dollars to meet a six hundred dollar budget has him worried considerably. “I can't see no way for me to recruit up,” July tells his white friends. “Everybody knew there ain't nothing in a small farm. Cotton scarcely bring ten cent uh pound, and just try for find job 'round this country now. I back in my tax, and God only know when I had uh new suit or when Mary put on new dress. Chillun kind can run 'round almost naked in the summer, but they need something for cover their hide come winter. All of um need clothes.”

The Geddes on the whole have not been a sickly family but they have had their share of illness, and the problem of providing adequate medical care for the group has always been

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a pressing one. Unless one of them becomes desperately ill, a doctor is never called. The nearest physician is across the river, eighteen miles away, and charges five dollars a visit, exclusive of drugs. The 13 Geddes' budget will not take care of this. A doctor cannot be summoned by telephone. There is no telephone on the island.

“Only thing for do is to put the sick in uh car and send um to Adams Run village, and the boy who run the line charge whole dollar for the trip. You visit the doctor and he charge another dollar and that ain't say nothing 'bout the physic. And time you take for get the sick to the village, you done 'most knock the breath out he body with the joggling. Yes sir, a clinic hold over in the village on certain day - a fine thing if you can use um. But, when clinic close you got for see doctor. I study on this matter some night 'till my mind 'most get 'way from me.” George will talk for hours on this subject if encouraged.

He says that during his married life he has spent two hundred and fifty dollars on doctor bills and drugs. He hates to think what might happen if any member of his family should need hospitalization. If he is extremely lucky he may get the sick person in the free ward of the Roper Hospital in Charleston, but the chances of admittance are slim. First he must go armed with letters from white citizens stating that he is a pauper, and then secure a doctor's certificate. The hospital is generally overcrowded, and there is no assurance that the ailing Geddes will be given a bed even though all of the red tape requirements are satisfied.

The Geddes have never heard of a balanced diet. They buy what their appetites call for - if they have the money. If the money is lacking they make out with the second or third choice.

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It is as simple as that. One can live a long time on sweet potatoes, home [ground?] grits, coffee sweetened with molasses, and fish or oysters.

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"Hominy is the need battle of the house," says July. "Can't do without hominy for breakfast, eat um for dinner too if we ain't got rice. Vegetable kind - yes we place vegetable 'pon the table if the pig or the weather ain't destroy the garden. Mary is uh good canner. She put up plenty of peach, okra, tomato and so forth last year, for God send uh good season. Ain't see much fruit except what Mary jar and what the chillun send we from New York."

"Rice, now - we never get we fill of rice. Always cook um for dinner when we got um in the house. Mary cook uh quart and uh half one meal. Go splendid with oyster stew and [?]."

July says that his wife tries to make her offsprings eat what is set before them, for [she?] does not want to raise fussy children. "Chillun awful sweet mouth though," he complains. "Always want to chew on candy or cake." They like rich stew well enough, it seems but care little for green vegetables unless boiled down in fat meat.

Mary has no knowledge of a balanced diet but she knows how to "decorate" a table, according to July. She will put a pitcher of milk on one corner, and a dish of butts on the other, and a pot of rice in the center. "it look real pretty when she get 15 through," July comments.

The head of the house is a cook in his own right. "I can cook uh pot of stew that will make you bite your tongue," says July with pride in his voice. "I take some butts meat and slice um thin and brown um over and let um boil 'long with uh mess of shrimp and okra and tomatoes. When it done you going to overeat yourself if you don't watch out."

July generally arises at six, winter mornings, unless it is Sunday, when he sleeps a little later. He thrown water over his face and then goes out and feeds the mule and the chickens. If there are any potatoes on hand he given a few to the cow. Around seven he eats a hearty breakfast, consisting of hominy, corn bread, butts and coffee. He goes to the field immediately after breakfast and remains there until the noon day meal is put on the table. An hour later he in back in the field. He knocks off at four o'clock. This allows

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him time to feed the animals and bring in wood before sunset. If there are no visitors or no church meeting to attend, he goes to bed soon after supper.

July is particular about taking a “wash off” before retiring. This wash off consists chiefly of bathing his feet. He looks with scorn at anybody who will go to bed with dirty feet.

The pole shanty was replaced some years ago by a four room frame dwelling that stands in a small enclosure just off a neighborhood road. The back yard is shaded by a young live oak with white-washed trunk. On one side is found the shed that houses the mule and the cart. Adjoining the shed is a pig pen and a “fowl house”. A potato bank rises in the rear of the dwelling, a mound of black dirt reinforced with corn stalks. Oyster shells, bleached milk white in the sun, are scattered about. A combination pole and wire fence cuts the yard off from the fields, and gives the curtilage the effect of compactness and security.

The dwelling does not satisfy July. He added a porch a few years ago and now he is planning to build two rooms on the rear of the house. He has part of the lumber but may have to wait long months before he can buy the rest.

The house is not nearly large enough for five persons. He and Mary sleep downstairs and Bluesteel, the youngest daughter, and a granddaughter named Susan sleep in the garret rooms. The kitchen, a little box - like affair that clings to the back of the dwelling, looks as though it might topple over in the next gust of wind. The family sit, eat and bathe in one of the rooms on the main floor. Here is located the only fireplace in the house. There is no way of heating the garret.

The furnishings are simple - four straight back chairs, two rockers with arms and rockers gone, two rickety tables, two iron bedsteads and a cot, a handmade cupboard, a second hand stove that often refuses to work, and a large foot tub. Each child has a blanket and a quilt apiece; July and Mary, two old 17 blankets. The mattresses are stuffed with straw.

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The family is never quite comfortable on cold winter nights, July say. "That little not-much covering we got ain't sufficient to keep chill down," he comments. Right now we badly in need of four or five new blanket. Quilt and comfort don't hold the heat."

He is also a class leader. Under his jurisdiction are eighteen young people, who look to him for spiritual guidance. Mary also hold an important office in the church. She is what is known as "Church Mother". Her chief duties are to care for the communion silver. She polishes it until it shines like a mirror. Nothing short of a hurricane or a cloudburst will keep July and his wife away from church services.

July recalls the time when he was not a child of the church. He sported with the gay woman, he danced, he went on drunken frolics. Drinking, it seems, was his besetting sin. When he was in his cups he was ready to fight anybody - even a white man. He managed, however, to keep out of serious trouble, and except for being hailed before the magistrate a time or two, he has had no conflict with the law.

All of that is over for July now. It is not seemly for a man holding a high office in the Baptist Church to consort with worldly people or take part in worldly pleasures, he says. "I want to live at peace with God and man and do my duty by my family. I got for make heaven when I die and I 18 going to miss um if I sport 'bout like the ungodly. I scarcely ever move out my house at night except to 'tend church supper or see the sick. One of them piccolo joint right near home. I hear the bang-bang music from here. You don't catch me visit um though, not July Geddes." He says this with an emphatic tone.

He is not strict with the children however. They can go to dances when they wish and "throw" 'way nickels on the piccolo, if they got nickel to throw 'way." July says that the government does not approve of parents being too strict with young people. "I hear that the government want the young folks to have uh good, nice sociable time," says July, "and I ain't one for raise objection 'gainst the law."

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He takes no part in politics. "The white people got uh Governor and uh President; we colored folks ain't got nobody to represent we in that line," he will say when questioned on the subject. He knows there is little use for him to apply for a certificate entitling him to cast his ballot. The constitution of South Carolina rules that before a person can secure a registration ticket he must prove that he owns property assessed at three hundred dollars or more, on which taxes have been paid, or else be able to read and interpret a clause of the constitution. July cannot qualify on either ground.

He has other things to think about now except the way the government is run, and what the white people are doing in Columbia. Six months of hard work stretch ahead of him. White 19 potatoes must be planted within a few weeks; soon he will be plowing cotton land and scattering fertilizers - so much to do and so little help. The fields are cold dreary places in late January. He dreads to think about the frost laden winds of February cutting him in the face as he follows the mule down the furrows.

July longs for lay-by time in August. Then he can put the plow in the shed, lay the hoe aside and take a two week's vacation. Most of the holiday will be spent in the creek. It will be hot then. Watermelons will be ripe and channel bass hungry for shrimp.